

LIONS LED BY DONKEYS

Fontaine lay in a damp bed, gazing up at a sky of canvas. The brown, heavy fabric rippled in the wind, made a sound that reminded him of the beach: of skin kissed by salt and sand and sun; of greasy hamburgers swaddled in waxed paper, and girls flushed from the cold of the Atlantic. At noon a pretty nurse he didn't recognize brought him his lunch. It was a sandwich of stale bread and indeterminable meat paired with a mealy apple.

"What's your name, hon?" Fontaine asked.

"Summer," the nurse replied. "You know that, Andy."

"I do?"

"Yes." She began to change linen bandages wrapped around his hands and forearms.

Fontaine stared at the nurse as she leaned over him, tried to find something familiar in her features. *Summer, her name is Summer*, he told himself. Her strawberry-blonde hair was pinned back for practicality's sake, and her eyes were corrupted blue wells tainted by small blooms of green algae. He felt no spark of recognition as he peered into those eyes.

She stroked his cheek. "Don't worry, it'll come back to you. It always does."

"Always? How long have I been here?"

Summer pulled his sheets off. Beneath, Fontaine was horrified to discover that he was wearing a catheter. He looked away, ashamed as this young, pretty nurse--maybe even still in her teens--began to swap a bag full of his urine for an empty one.

She says you know her Andy..

He tried to remove his mind from the embarrassing situation, pictured Summer at the beach, what she'd look like as she waded out of the surf, scant bathing suit plastered to body, nipples hard. He'd assumed he would be lifeless...*down there*... but a stir of excitement in that area warned Fontaine that this might not be the case, and probably the worst evasive maneuver in recorded history, especially while Summer was poking around...*down there*... He crammed the sandwich in his mouth and chewed on gristly meat.

Summer tucked the sheet back in place and rewarded him with a knowing, toothsome smile. "I'm not sure how long you've been here. It's been a while."

"What's a while? Days? Weeks?"

"Yes," she answered vaguely.

"What's wrong with me?"

Summer bit her lip. "I'm not sure if I really should say..."

"*Please.*"

"Let me fetch the doctor. He'll explain everything to you."

Fontaine didn't want her to leave, but she had other patients to attend, there were other beds all around him with other soldiers, and judging by the groans of some of them, they were in worse shape than he was. He watched Summer depart and allowed himself to again imagine her exiting the ocean, rivulets of salty, icy water running down ivory flesh, goose pimples on arms and thighs.

Beside his bed was a small, makeshift end table with lamp, book, some sheets of paper and pen. He pawed open the book to the title page. *The King James Bible*. Fontaine sighed and put it back.

As he waited for the doctor to arrive, he tried to force himself to finish his lunch, got two more bites in, and then gave up. He occupied himself with his neighbors, but they weren't exactly a cathartic sight, and upset his stomach as much lunch. To his left was a British soldier (indicated by the folded uniform tucked in a cupboard by his cot) in traction, a tube inserted in his gullet emptying blood-streaked pus into an overflowing tin pail set on the floor. To Fontaine's right was what he assumed to be a man, but it was impossible to tell beneath the folds and creases of melted, puckered flesh. Whatever it was looked more like a giant wad of chewed bubble gum than a human being.

The doctor eventually approached, weaving between beds in a strange sort of dance, ignoring veined hands that strained and reached for him. A gauze mask obscured his face, and he wore thick bifocals and a thin white cap. In one hand he gripped a scalpel, the sharp metal shining brightly even in the dimness of the field hospital. Over his clothes was a rubber apron. Fontaine had a strong urge to recoil from him.

"Andy!" the doctor cried in a bright, chipper voice that clashed with his macabre guise. "My name is Dr. Carter. Nurse Summer informed me you wished to speak to me."

Fontaine skipped the pleasantries. "How long have I been here, doc?"

"I can't rightly say, I've been so busy. About two weeks would be my best guess."

"Why am I still in a field hospital then? That's what this is, right, a field hospital? Why haven't I been shipped home, or back to England?"

"Yes, this *is* a field hospital, and the reason you're still here is that you're not well enough yet to risk a move. Plain and simple. Another week or so, perhaps, and before you know it, you'll be home with your family spending Christmas stateside. Be patient, your days in France are just about at an end. I guarantee it."

"What--what's wrong with me? I don't feel sick."

A long, weighted pause. Finally Dr. Carter spoke: "Andy, what's the last thing you *do* remember?"

#

A night sky lit by sizzling flares. The sharp sting of mustard gas. A muddy field littered with Fontaine's friends, snared in patches of barbed-wire, covered in bullae.

Fontaine can barely see or hear through the constraining mask he wears, but he knows if he takes it off, he chances chemical burns and blindness. He keeps it on. The squad stands at attention in a neat row at the bottom of their trench, nicknamed Ass Crack. This has been home for the past four months to three brigades. Fontaine serves his time in small intervals, called up from the reserve line to the front line (Ass Crack is the front line) in one week stints. No one can handle Ass Crack for more than one week at a time. After that, they're pulled back, and another brigade takes your place. Two brigades in front, one in the rear. That's the rotating schedule.

And now they're about to leave it--Ass Crack--to make a frontal dash on the German western line. The last two pushes tonight have been suicide runs. There're no open flanks to assault.

It's Fontaine's turn.

He never thought he'd miss Ass Crack. It was like living in the...well, the ass crack of the world. It was dirty, it stunk of a latrine, and it was never dry. Half the squad had trench fever, the other half had trench foot, and everyone had lice.

But it was safe.

Cringing between those mud walls, it was *safe*. Safety, of course, being relative. Snipers picked off

the careless that were dumb enough to poke their heads over Ass Crack's top (no one except goldbrickers did this, and even then they just stuck up a hand clenching a lit cigarette to score a one-way ticket home), or used armor-piercing rounds to shoot at loopholes. Howitzers rained down, spalling shrapnel and talus; gas seeped in. It was hell, a coffin made of wet earth that dripped and oozed and bled, but compared to the area between the lines, Ass Crack was the cradle formed by your mother's loving arms.

Fontaine estimates that it's two hundred yards to the closest German trench. *At least.* Two hundred yards of barbed wire and land mines, of stepping over your mates' corpses, except some of them aren't dead; some of them cry your name as you pass them by, beg you to put them out of their misery. And last but certainly not least, No Man's Land is covered by three German machine guns that Fontaine is aware of--those bastard MG08's--ugly sons of bitches with fat barrels for water-cooling that can spit out four hundred rounds a minute.

He needs a drink, considers removing his mask to steal a sip from his canteen (it'll probably be the last drink of water of his life, and this depresses Fontaine as much as anything else), but then his Sarge is there, sans gas mask, barking orders.

"Men!" Sarge hollers. Every sergeant should be capable of yelling at the top of their lungs, and Fontaine had to give his Sarge credit--he had a voice that was bred for yelling. "It's finally our turn at this rodeo! I know you've been chomping at the bit, eager to get your hands wrapped around some Boche throat! Well, tonight you're gonna get that opportunity!"

Fontaine smirks inside his mask despite himself. He would like nothing more than to wipe Germany off the face of Rand McNally, so everyone can pack up and go home, but he wouldn't exactly describe himself as "chomping at the bit" to stagger out between the lines and get masticated by waiting riflemen. Given a choice of that and staying in Ass Crack, he'd choose Ass Crack every day of the week.

Sarge continues, "We're going over the top! Anyone scared, you go ahead and be scared. You can piss vinegar in your pants, you can shit candy bars in your diapers, but you *CANNOT* turn back! I catch anyone turning back and I'll shoot them myself!"

"Our target is German trench designated Pox Bitch. You know it; we've been staring at her through periscopes for half a goddamn year. That slut is thought to contain at least fifty Huns for our quadrant, and the fuckers are dug in deeper than a Texas oil derrick. Three stories deep in some places. Allied artillery has been shelling her past two days, and let's hope it's softened her up a bit, but we can't count on that. The last two brigades will testify in front of St. Peter's pearly gates about depending on artillery,

requiescat in pace.

"I need every man with me, grenadiers go first at seven yards, and followed by the rest of the infantry after a ten count. There're more than seven thousand other soldiers spread out making this same damn push. Don't worry about them, don't talk to them, don't even think or look at them. My squad sticks to *ME!*"

A private named McMurphy offers a muffled prayer. The soldiers bow their heads and chorus a reflexive "Amen!" afterwards.

"Righty-o, no time like the present!" Sarge chirps pleasantly, as if he's looking forward to it. "Over the top! Over the top! C'mon you apes, you want to live forever? Up and over! Now now *NOW!*"

Fontaine scrabbles up the mud slope, takes his first ever step onto No Man's Land, the dead world between the trenches. His boots struggle for purchase on the slippery terrain. Almost instantly the shooting begins. German artillery streams overhead, pounding the earth like the fists of God. The flash of muzzles in triplicate draw his attention, those MG08's opening up, pouring lead over the roof of Fontaine's head. The man in front of him collapses in a cloud of red mist. A shell hits to the left, the scraps of three men--torsos and legs and arms--sail through the air. The land is studded with the stumps of dead trees, none of them more than four feet in height, pock-marked with bullet holes, branches and bark stripped away by heavy armament.

Fontaine makes his way through the desolate woodland, hunkering behind a particularly thick stump for shelter, boots squelching in the mud. Sarge grabs him, screams something Fontaine can't hear over the explosions, and shoves him onward. He thinks maybe he's wet himself, but can't tell for sure, and decides it doesn't matter anyway.

He's been running for less than a minute, but it feels like a lifetime, and the German trench, Pox Bitch, is no closer. If anything it seems further away. He's shaking so badly he almost drops his rifle, and when he comes to a belt of razor-wire--at least thirty feet deep--he's shocked to find that a tunnel has already been carved through the defensive barrier. The first two brigades must've got something right, accomplished *something* before dying, those poor lions led by donkeys. More than ten thousand men sacrificing themselves just to cut a hole in thick-gauge wire. It wouldn't all be for nothing. Fontaine bends and shuffles through the tunnel without notice of pain as the rusted, metallic fishhooks tear through his uniform.

Exiting that metal shaft, his friends Paul and Jim are on either flank of Fontaine, running right

beside him. Paul vanishes in a reverse sky-bound waterfall of loam and topsoil. Warm blood splashes Fontaine's cheek. *Paul's blood*. He grunts and keeps going, and considers more than once dropping to the ground, faking death. But that would only prolong his stay here in this hell, and if the stretcher-bearers came out later, how would he explain his lack of injuries?

Jim dies shortly after Paul, and with less spectacle, less fanfare. A round catches him square in the forehead and he sinks to his knees before falling flat on his face. Fontaine zigs to the left as a Howitzer zags to the right, obliterating a boulder, whipping shards of molten rock that stink of cordite.

A machine gun pivots in his direction, bullets strafing the ground in front of him. Dirt flies in his eyes, and Fontaine stumbles. Sarge is at his back again, pulling him up, almost carrying him the rest of the way. Grenades are lobbed into Pox Bitch. Two of the MG08's fall silent. *Blessedly silent*. Sarge drags him the rest of the way to the lip of the trench, and Fontaine is standing on a parapet of sandbags looking down at a regiment of soldiers--not Germans, not Americans or English--just soldiers, men that are just as filthy and tired and terrified as he is, trying their best not to get killed.

Fontaine squeezes the trigger of his Springfield.

#

That's the last thing you remember?" Dr. Carter said.

Fontaine hesitated, tried to dredge up anything beyond the initial point of attacking Pox Bitch, but as much as he tried, he couldn't recall anything else. "Yes."

"You were shot, Andy. You were shot in the head, above your right ear."

Fontaine instinctively reached up. Prowling fingers found that his hair had all been shaved off, and a bandage taped to the scalp.

"You don't remember getting shot, Andy? Try. *Try* to remember."

"No, there's nothing...nothing after...except when I woke up here."

"You've woken up here many times," Dr. Carter explained patiently. "There're brief moments of lucidity, as you're experiencing now. Unfortunately, these always end in longer spells of dementia. You hallucinate and rave. You sleep...but it's a disturbed sleep. You have terrible nightmares and you scream

and cry out."

Fontaine didn't know what to say to that. He believed what Dr. Carter was telling him, but because he didn't remember any of it, it was like it never happened, or at the very least happened to another person.

"Can you help me, doc? Can you cure me?"

"No, not here. Maybe they can in London...or Boston. But it might take years."

"What can I do then?"

"Rest, gather your strength, it may be all you need. Time is the best medicine. If you're a religious man--" Carter shrugged, "--you can pray to the god of your choosing."

"How long do these 'periods of lucidity' last?"

"A day at the most. I'll send Summer over to check on you in a little while." Dr. Carter paused as he turned to leave, glanced at his watch. "One last thing Andy. The bullet I dug out of your brain..."

"What about it?"

"It was thirty-eight--from a Colt, if I'm not mistaken."

"So?"

"The gun that shot you, Andy, was American."

#

Summer didn't return until dinner time, serving him canned spaghetti, a slice of dry bread and a cup of watered-down juice.

"The doc says I've been here a couple of weeks. Has...has my family been notified? Have I received any letters?"

"Your family has been notified of your situation." She made him lean forward while she fluffed his pillow. "You haven't received any letters though."

Fontaine wondered how much longer he had before he slipped back into delirium. *Twelve hours?* Maybe he'd already received letters and had forgotten. Maybe the staff was lying to him in order to protect his fragile mind, hiding the letters from him. He didn't blame them if that was the case. Maybe

they would only upset him further and set him off. Maybe they already *had* set him off.

Summer caressed him warmly. "Don't worry, you'll get some. Mail is slow coming this close to the front." She began to change his catheter.

Asked Fontaine, "What's wrong with me? I mean--down *there*. I don't feel anything wrong, and doc said I was shot in the head."

"There's nothing wrong down there, but you lose control of your bodily functions during your episodes. It was easier this way rather than changing your sheets every couple of hours."

"Oh." He'd been pissing the bed. Probably shitting it too. *Vinegar and candy bars*, as Sarge used to say (maybe--*hopefully*--he was still saying it, Fontaine couldn't recall if Sarge had survived or not). And Summer had been cleaning him. Hosing the excrement off him. Fontaine wanted to curl up and die of shame. She was so gentle and beautiful, and for her to see him in this degraded state was almost worse than taking a bullet to the brain.

Night fell. Kerosene lanterns were lit, strung up throughout the field hospital like giant lightning bugs perched on the wooden beams. Fontaine's neighbors had been switched out, and he couldn't imagine it was due to a sudden marked improvement in their health. Dead. Both of them. The Limey and the wad of gum. But beds didn't stay vacant for long in hell, and soon he had new neighbors. One was an American kid with a stomach wound, and the boy couldn't keep quiet--he moaned and thrashed, winced as he spat up bloody bile. Fontaine tried to talk to him, tried to get the kid's attention on anything else except the pain he must be experiencing. He engaged him in conversation. If he didn't, Fontaine thought he'd go mad listening to the constant weeping. The kid was trying to remain tacit--you could tell by the way he'd clench his teeth and release his breath in jagged aspirations--but it wasn't enough, and often he would breakdown, blubbering and sobbing.

"Why don't you give the kid some damn drugs?" Fontaine hollered at no one.

A moment later Summer appeared with a cool washcloth and mopped the boy's sweaty brow. "We ran out of ACE two days ago," she said.

"ACE?"

"Alcohol, chloroform, and ether. We're out of stock."

A hospital without anesthesia.

How were they performing surgeries? What were they using for pain management, if anything at all? Damn it, how could soldiers be expected to get better if they're not even administered a shot of

whiskey before their infected limbs were unceremoniously cut off?

"You're kidding," scoffed Fontaine.

Summer shook her head solemnly. "The last shipment was intercepted by a flight of Albatros."

Fontaine knew what Albatros were--German aircraft, had a range of about seventy-five miles. The supply line (probably trains) must've been close to the hospital when it was attacked. There were no nearby German airfields, and roads couldn't be navigated over the range of trenches.

"So what're you using to treat people?" Fontaine asked.

"Whatever we can scrounge, beg, borrow and steal. But we can't spare what we don't have."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. It's not your fault."

Summer proffered a false smile. "I know, Andy. I know."

Fontaine thought she might cry. Her hair was unkempt, the bun coming loose, and those blue ocean eyes had a shine to them. He laid a hand on her leg, above the knee--the only place he could reach from his cot. He hoped she didn't think it a come-on, and she seemed to receive it as the comfort it was meant to be. Not that Fontaine wouldn't mind, but a hospital during the Great War-- a field one at that, that reeked of plasma and entrails, flies buzzing and crawling everywhere, a cacophony of men screaming in agony--was not Fontaine's idea of romance. It was like taking your date to a butcher shop.

"It'll get better," he said soothingly.

"No, it won't. No one gets better here. No one here gets out alive."

She left, and Fontaine tried to ignore his neighbors by delving deeper into this morning's beach fantasy. He visualized the dunes at Hyannis Port, demarcated by a green wavy fence. The sound of the breakers, the grit-feel of the sand, the briny tang of the salt. He remembered--just before he was shipped to Europe--he'd spent a week on Cape Cod with a summer fling, a pretty girl whose name and face he now couldn't recall, probably because of his recent head trauma. And so she became Summer, the war nurse. Together they wasted hours walking around, sunbathing, drinking beer and making love. They stayed at a quaint bed and breakfast inn, woke early, ate a hearty breakfast of omelets and fried potatoes before leaving to spend the day on the coast. That had been a good time, a time to get lost in...

"...Auuugghhhh..."

"Shut up kid," Fontaine snapped. Gone was the Cape, gone the girl (*Summer, her name is Summer, she says you know her Andy*). He was back in the field hospital, yelling at the dying American boy. He'd had enough. It was going on hours with his wailing and Fontaine needed to rest. He would go insane if

he had to listen to anymore. Fontaine considered smothering the kid with a pillow--surely he was going to die anyway, and it would be charity, not murder.

There was nothing wrong with Fontaine's legs; the bullet had struck his head. It would be easy to slip over there and end this excruciating, drawn out farce.

Fontaine was half-considering getting out of his bed. Not really, he couldn't bring himself to throttle another human, never mind a child, never mind an American. This wasn't the hot tempo of war. This was the dreary monotony of recuperation. But still...he'd be doing everyone, especially the kid, a favor.

"Andy, good, you're still awake!"

Dr. Carter was on his way over, and Fontaine again had to resist the urge to shrink away. The doctor's face was still obscured by the gauze mask; the rubber apron now covered not only with blood, but also bits of pink offal and skin. Fontaine could see individual hairs sprouting from said skin, probably a leg or forearm judging by the pattern.

Fontaine was struck by guilt, certain Dr. Carter knew what he'd been considering.

"I'm surprised, I thought you would've lapsed already," the doctor said. He was painted red up to the elbows.

Fontaine raised his hands. "Still here, doc. Still me."

"That's great. Do you remember anymore about the events leading up to your injury?"

"No."

Dr. Carter frowned. Fontaine couldn't see it due to the mask, but he knew it all the same.

"Try," Dr. Carter said. "Try hard. The last thing you'd recalled previously was going into the enemy's trench. What came after that?"

"I already told you doc, there's nothing after that 'til I woke up here this morning."

"Memory gain would be a great stride on the road to your recovery. Have you been trying to remember?"

Fontaine didn't want to remember the war. It didn't seem compulsory to his recovery. Better to forget, to tie a chain around its ankles and bury it at sea.

"No," Fontaine confessed.

"Try. You dropped into the trench and were firing your rifle."

#

The Springfield clicks dry. It doesn't matter. Fontaine can scavenge plenty of ammo off his dead brothers. Pox Bitch is cleared, the Germans dead or dying. The squad isn't there to take prisoners, and their own casualty rate--best that Fontaine can determine--hovers somewhere around eighty percent. Revenge is at the tip of their trigger fingers, and the Americans oblige. Sarge walks casually down a row of captured Germans, hands on their heads as they kneel on the duckboards, and empties his sidearm into the back of their skulls. *It must be satisfying*, Fontaine thinks, but he leaves the execution work to others.

Now that they've taken the trench (or at least the part nicknamed Pox Bitch--the squad could never take the *entire* trench, which stretched for miles and miles. Most of that work was left to the brigade, seven thousand men multi-nationals in total.), they're surrounded by redoubts and Germans are firing on them enfilade. Pox Bitch is not the new Ass Crack, as much as Fontaine had hoped. He is not safe, even relatively speaking. A bullet whinnies off his helmet as if to remind Fontaine of this fact.

He reloads off corpses.

A group of Boche have escaped the initial assault and barricaded themselves in a rear dugout. They hurl grenades and open fire as they take cover behind concrete delved thirty-feet into the ground. Sarge registers them and the redoubts only after he's dispatched every last surviving German that's within his grasp.

"Flamethrowers!" he calls.

There're no flamethrowers in Sarge's squad, and if any were assigned to their position in the brigade, none of them made it between the lines alive to make their way to Pox Bitch. The squad is forced to go into the pitch-black dugout and take the heavily fortified Germans head-on. Fontaine's legs refuse to obey command, and so again Sarge shoves him onward, into the darkened hole. When the Springfield clicks dry Fontaine melees with his trench knife--a dagger attached to steel knuckles. The blade sinks to the hilt in a German's eye socket and gets stuck, the force shuddering Fontaine's elbow. He plants his knees against the stiffening body and pulls the blade free. Foreign blood drenches his hands and chest. Small-arms fire is exchanged, muzzle flashes blinding him, the stink of cordite and gun

powder singeing the hairs in his nose (he has, at some point, lost his gas mask), and he stumbles forward, blindly swinging his knife in front of him. When he arrives at stairs that lead to a second-floor buried underneath the trench he still can't see and falls head-first down concrete steps until skidding to a stop on the landing.

Men trample his back, and he knows they're American by their curses as they trip and spill around his downed body.

"Friendly! I'm a friendly!" he cries.

They don't kill him, and that's a boon. He gets back on his feet and follows the man in front of him, Fontaine's hand on his shoulder. The third underground floor--some sort of subbasement with water up to the knees and tunnels snaking to other parts of the trench--is a battlefield. The stranger in front of him slumps with Fontaine's hand still grasping his shoulder. He knows instantly that the man is dead. There're more starbursts of muzzle flashes as the Germans open up during their retreat. Grenades splash, sink, and then geysers erupt. Smoke quickly fills the tunnel. Rifle bolts are snapped; bullets fired; men collapse and drown. Fontaine hunkers behind those in front, as he has no ammunition and isn't about to go charging across the narrow field of attack. The fighting intensifies, it crescendos, and just as suddenly falls flat. It doesn't take long to subdue the Germans. When their ammo is depleted they relent, scream: "*Ich ergebe mich!*" and Fontaine rushes forward to snag one by the collar and haul him to the surface.

Sarge is unimpressed but satisfied. The redoubts on either side have since been quieted by the remainder of the brigade; no more firing enfilade. It's a calm that Fontaine relishes.

He hands his prisoner over, which Sarge promptly executes. Fontaine tries not to think about it, about those officer stripes on the soldier's uniform and what intelligence he might've had. After he loots the dead man's pockets, stealing cigarettes and a silver flask, he tries to get some sleep.

#

Wake up! Wake up Andy!"

Fingers snapped in front of his eyes; Fontaine jerked awake. The doctor, Dr. Carter, hovered by his

bedside. It took Fontaine a few moments to collect his bearings--where he was, what he was doing here--but the simple fact that he *could* piece it all together tempered his anxiety. He was still himself. He hadn't been lost to the head injury...not yet.

"Sorry doc."

"It's okay."

"I remember..."

"What? What do you remember?" Excited.

"We took the trench," Fontaine said, with a hint of pride, chin raised. "We took Pox Bitch."

Dr. Carter sighed. "Yes, the eastern trench has been taken. It was taken weeks ago."

"Oh."

He didn't take Pox Bitch alone, Fontaine knew that, and certainly didn't take the entire eastern trench by himself. He was nothing special, a grunt, government issued, and he harbored no delusions of the role he'd played. But surviving a frontal assault on an enemy encampment, and to have that accomplishment flippantly turned aside with a casual brush-off, made him see red. *Oh, so you managed to survive charging a German trench that had been occupied by hostile forces for the past three years? Sorry chap! Old news! Didn't you get the recent telegraph? Hollywood released 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea starring Lois Alexander! That's all the people care about.* Not that taking the eastern trench is anything special as a whole. After that there's only another fallback trench, and another, and another, almost all the way back to Berlin...

And the Germans knew how to design their trenches. You had to give them that.

"What happened to you? Do you recall the injury?"

Fontaine shook his head. He wasn't shot in the head, never mind by an American. The last thing he recalled was presenting his prisoner, an officer, to the Sarge.

#

An hour later and the barrage begins: mortars strike, artillery guns unleashing a maelstrom. Communications are down. No one has been able to get out a message that Pox Bitch has been taken,

which means the allies will continue with their shelling in preparation for the next squad's attempt to take the trench.

Fontaine, like the rest of his squad, seeks shelter in the dugouts. It's unnerving, to have a thirty foot drop of blackness at their backs. *Probably swarming with stray Boche*. All the tunnels down there connect to the trenches, they could pour out of anywhere from their maggot-holes. It wouldn't be surprising if the Krauts were planning a counterattack. There might be a Jerry at this moment, pulling himself up the stairs in the darkness, knife clenched in teeth as he moves forward, finds Fontaine with his exposed back, and then the knife comes out, spits it from his mouth and now it's in his hand, and he raises it--

Fontaine conducts an abrupt one-eighty and debates--in a microsecond--whether to blind-fire or not. But he's not sure if the shadow behind him is a friendly, an enemy, or just a trick of the light.

"Cocksucker motherfucker shit on a shingle," Sarge says as he ducks into the dugout. A shower of debris from a fragmentation explosive follows him inside; dirt patters on his soiled uniform and helmet. "Goddamn intel dropped the ball. Lewis! Give me the fucking birds!"

Sarge is old school, had fought in the Philippines and in Peking during the Boxer Rebellion. He didn't rely on radios or telegraphs anymore than he did flamethrowers, and so in the squad was a cage carried by PFC Lewis, and in that cage were three carrier pigeons.

Sarge has Lewis jot down a message. Fontaine can't see it, but catches low mutterings of the dictation: *Stop your fucking firing...friendlies...Pox Bitch taken...Repeat...*

The bird is launched skyward in a nimbus of feathers as it pushes off into the air. Probably Lewis knows its name. He was familiar with pigeon posts and had a connection to the birds, but right now Fontaine doesn't care a fart in the wind if its name is Otto Von Bismarck, as long as it finds its coop and delivers the message.

The bird gains altitude, levels off, and makes a beeline west. Fontaine stands on tiptoes to watch its flight over the shoulders of those in front. The world beyond the trench is an erupting volcano, liquefied earth tosses into the stratosphere, the howl and shriek of incoming meteors deafening. It looks like the Perseids out there. There's no way the bird can make it through.

But make it through the bird does. Twenty yards. Thirty. It dips with drops in air pressure, twirls as concussive waves rip it sideways, back and forth, only to pluck itself out of the violent air current and continue straight and true. Tears sting Fontaine's eyes. Rat with wings *it is not*. This little piece of shit

is about to save a dozen human lives, and he swears to every God in history that he will feed every pigeon he encounters for the rest of his.

The bird is knocked down by an armament shell a hundred yards in flight. Maybe a hundred and fifty. It's no more than a dot in the night sky, either way. There's not much to see--the bird spins lazily as it dives, outlined by a tail of burning plumage like a comet.

It's dead.

Sarge readies the second bird with an identical message and sends it flapping out. The squad serves as an audience, watching with rapt attention. This one doesn't make it as far as the first. Almost immediately following takeoff it's severed in half by oncoming French cannons fired from rails.

"Last one," says Lewis as he hands over the third and final bird.

"What's its name?" asks Fontaine.

"What?"

"Its name, what's its name?"

"Oh," Lewis says and gives the pigeon a second glance. "That's Mon Chere."

"Fly you cunt!" Sarge screams, pumping his fist. "Fly!" The pigeon makes it twenty yards and then its wing is clipped by a stray shot (must've been friendly, although why the hell anyone would think the Germans were sending messages west is beyond Fontaine). It does a barrel roll and dives to the earth before recovering, gaining altitude. Wing strength looks good.

And then it's hit again.

#

Wake up, sleepy head."

Fontaine came to, gazing at an angel disguised as Summer. *I know her*. The time of day was indeterminate, a leaden, pewter-tinged hour sometime shortly before daybreak. The hospital was doused in shades of pearl.

"Hello?" He fought his way out of sleep. "When is it?"

"Tomorrow," replied Summer. "Don't worry, you're still *you*."

"Should I be?"

"No. This is the longest."

Fontaine left it at that. He wouldn't push the fortunes of his sanity. If it really was tomorrow and he was still aware, he would take it at face value. He reproved himself for falling asleep in the first place. He should be composing letters to his family, to his Hyannis girl, to his friends in the squad, instead of risking the time by sleeping while he was still himself. Who knew when he'd disappear again?

"Water," he demanded.

Summer poured him a glass from a carafe. Fontaine downed the tepid water in three swigs.

He was surrounded by a fresh batch of casualties from the allied front. The American boy with the stomach wound was gone (*did you ever catch his name?*), replaced by a quadruple amputee with its face shrouded in a beehive of bandages. A mummy, maybe Cleopatra in disguise. To his left was an older gentleman with porcine features offset by a calm, almost solace death mask. The air carried the sweet stink of decomposition, and he perceived the air traffic of flies through the dim light, the subway-squirm of maggots through suppuration.

"Do you remember me yet?" Summer asked.

"No," he admitted.

She was familiar, but in the deceptive way familiarity possessed, that borderline between being drunk or being sober, where your next decision leads to a complete blackout or the lack of a hangover.

"You will."

She departed, leaving him uncertain and afraid. *Who was she?* What made him so special to her? Nothing, that's what made him special. Nothing, as Dr. Carter had been so eager to point out by explaining that the Eastern Front had been taken weeks ago. He was stale bread. He was yesterday's news.

He spent the morning hours wide awake, gnawing at himself, pulling himself apart. He was infantry, cannon fodder, a private. Nothing to write home about. *Nothing nothing nothing.*

Was she toying with him?

No, he didn't get that from her. Her attentions were sincere.

He watched the sunrise filter through the fabric of the tent.

Andy!" Sarge bellows. "Get your ass up here. We need runners."

Fontaine reluctantly pushes his way to the front of the dugout.

"Strip all that gear off. McMurphy, take his weapon. He won't need it. No, no, Andy, keep your damn helmet on. Drop your bandoliers and canteen, though. Got to make sure you can move as fast as possible."

"Why me, Sarge?" asks Fontaine. He's already survived one suicide mission tonight. Now they're sending him on another one. He doesn't think his luck will hold out for that long.

"'Cause it's got to be someone, and that's you. Now I want you to run as fast as you can back to Ass Crack and have them radio whoever's firing on us that Pox Bitch has been taken. If you don't, none of us are going to be alive come morning."

Fontaine wants to protest, wants someone else to volunteer. Can't they see he's terrified? He isn't the main character in this story, he isn't the hero. He's just a scared kid from Vermont. There's no way he's making it two hundred yards through that warzone.

He's shoved out of the dugout. With trembling hands he pulls himself up the sandbags, out and over the parapet. He flops into the mud and begins crawling.

"Run! Run you chickenshit!" Sarge calls from behind him. "Don't crawl! You get up and you *run*!"

Easy for you to say, he thinks. You're safely hidden away in a bunker. I'm the one between the lines.

Fontaine staggers to his feet and starts to sprint. He shuffles through the razor wire tunnel and reaches the patch of tree stumps sticking out of the earth like gravestones. He could see the low wall of Ass Crack now. It was so close, yet still he pegs his chances of ever making it there at five to one. Flares stream through a sky clouded with smoke and gas. The cannonade continues to pound out a rough harmony like the percussion section of an orchestra. The good news is that the further he gets away from Pox Bitch, the less likely he is to be hit by artillery. The bad news is that the closer he gets to Ass Crack, the more likely he is to be shot by waiting soldiers, mistaken for a Boche counterattack.

Suddenly the ground disintegrates beside him, and Fontaine is flung through the air, landing in the twisted roots of a Cedar. His ears are ringing and the wind has been knocked out of him. He writhes in the mud, trying to catch his breath. It seems that all his appendages are intact, all the important pieces

are still there, but his forearms are burnt and perforated with tiny bits of shrapnel. He wasn't sure what had happened, what had exploded. It could've been anything. A landmine, a bomb, a cannon. It seemed as if the entire world had become combustible.

He takes shelter behind the stump of Cedar, pulling his helmet low over his eyes and cowering. He jams his knees beneath his chin and rocks back and forth, back and forth. He doesn't want to be here. He wants to be home. He wants to be on the beach in Hyannis Port, chasing his girlfriend, Ruth, through the surf. She was so beautiful, with strawberry-blond hair and the most amazing blue eyes Fontaine had ever seen. *Would* ever see, chances are.

Dawn is fast approaching. There is a lightening to the sky in the east. How long has Fontaine been out here? The shelling continues, on and on at a hectic pace. He needs to get up and scramble the remaining hundred yards to Ass Crack, he's already made it halfway there, and the trench will be exponentially safer than between the lines. He hopes his friends are still alive, he hopes that Sarge is still alive.

He hopes he hasn't let everyone down, but that's a kind of an understatement.

I hope everyone isn't dead because of my cowardice.

His legs refuse to obey the orders his brain sends them. Fontaine prays that he was paralyzed in the explosion--that he can't move because his spine has been severed and not because he's too afraid. But he knows that's not true. He can wiggle his toes, move his feet just fine. His spine isn't severed because he never had one in the first place. He's an invertebrate craven.

The sun ascends over the horizon. Fontaine gets a better look than he wants to at the battlefield. Scattered everywhere are corpses, some piled right on top of the other, hundreds if not thousands of men in American uniforms. The mud has turned blood red.

Finally the shelling ceases. He pokes his head above the tree stump. The ensuing silence is disorienting. It throws him off balance.

A shadow unexpectedly falls across him, as if a cloud has passed by the sun. Fontaine spins around and instinctively raises a rifle he's no longer carrying, hasn't carried since leaving the dugout. His mind goes back to the image of the Hun with a knife in his mouth, creeping up behind Fontaine.

"Andy..." Sarge says.

"Oh it's you, Sarge. Thank God."

"They're dead. They're all dead."

"Who?" Fontaine asks, even though he already knows the answer. "Who's dead?"

"*My squad!*" shrieks Sarge. "The squad you were supposed to run to Ass Crack to save. A battery zeroed in on our location and blew the dugout to hell. If they aren't dead already, then they're buried alive with about a million Krauts."

"I'm sorry, sir. I was struck by a mortar or something. Can't move."

Sarge snarled, "Liar! I told you...I told everyone, that if I caught anyone turning back I'd shoot them myself."

Sarge pulled out his sidearm, a Colt 38, and aimed the barrel between Fontaine's eyes.

"No Sarge! No, wait, please—"

#

You remember now?"

Fontaine lay on his side, curled up in bed. "Yes," he admitted. "It was my sergeant. He tried to murder me!"

Dr. Carter sat beside the bed, a soothing hand on Fontaine's arm. Summer stood behind him.

"Well..." the doctor said. "To be fair, you kind of had that coming. You're indirectly responsible for the deaths of more than ten soldiers, people that thought you were their friends, people that depended on you."

"He should've sent other runners! Why am I the only one responsible?"

"Your sergeant *did* send out two other runners. They both died attempting to reach Ass Crack."

"It's not fair," sobbed Fontaine. "I didn't...I didn't...wait. How do you know all this? You weren't there. You *can't* know."

"You've woken many times, Andy. You've experienced thousands of periods of lucidity, always followed by the same number of dementia episodes."

"Thousands? I thought I've been here only two weeks."

"Really, what does time matter in eternity?"

"Eternity?"

"Yes, Andy. You see, no one here ever leaves the field hospital, no one ever gets better, and no one goes home, because they're already dead." Dr. Carter patted his arm reassuringly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other patients to attend."

"Wait! Don't go! Please, what're you saying? Summer..."

The words caught in Fontaine's throat. She wasn't Summer. Her name was Ruth.

"I...I don't understand," he said.

"You have penance to pay, Andy," she replied, pressing a loving hand against his cheek. "You've been judged and found wanting. You must answer for your sins."

"But...but why are you here? Are you dead, too?"

"I'm not Ruth," she said. "I'm a part of your torment. All those lazy Sundays, those summer flings, the vacations to Cape Cod. They're all me now. I'm a reminder of everything you've lost." She leaned over and kissed him softly on the lips. "I'm sorry."

#

Fontaine lay in a damp bed, gazing up at a sky of canvas. The brown, heavy fabric rippled in the wind, made a sound that reminded him of the beach: of skin kissed by salt and sand and sun; of greasy hamburgers swaddled in waxed paper, and girls flushed from the cold of the Atlantic. At noon a pretty nurse he didn't recognize brought him his lunch. It was a sandwich of stale bread and indeterminable meat paired with a mealy apple.

"What's your name, hon?" Fontaine asked.

"Summer," the nurse replied. "You know that, Andy."

"I do?"

He felt no spark of recognition as he peered into her eyes.

THE END

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